

Changing the System: Brian Eno, Sonic Youth and the combination of rock and experimental music

“One single word might sum up what appears ... to be the most significant quality of experimental music: limitlessness.” Michael Nyman’s description of experimental music could also apply to rock music. This paper examines the relationship between rock and experimental music through the eyes of experimental musicians who have collaborated with rock musicians.

The first example explores London in the late 1960s-early 1970s, where Brian Eno was part of the Portsmouth Sinfonia and the Scratch Orchestra. I have interviewed over thirty members of the experimental music community of that time who participated with Eno in both organizations. In the second, the Sonic Youth album, “Goodbye Twentieth Century,” demonstrates another type of partnership between rock musicians and their experimental colleagues. Interviews with the experimental music composers James Tenney, Pauline Oliveros and Christian Wolff, combined with Toege’s book on Sonic Youth and web-based research provide new source material for a re-analysis of that collaboration. Both examples provide the basis for a study of unanswered questions regarding the relationship between rock and experimental music, questions involving the benefits and liabilities involved in making such a connection, the common aesthetics connecting the two and the economic, social or political environment surrounding such a synthesis.

Mark Swed, in his review of the Sonic Youth album for the Los Angeles Times, said, “experimental pop musicians and experimental classical composers spoke the same language, whatever their training or background.” That common language, “messy, fun, and anarchic, with occasional revelations,” is the focus of this paper.